No. 63

The REDEMPTION of Marie Gordon

THE TRAGIC STORY OF WRONGED WOMANHOOD

Price 10¢

"I'll give you anything you want!" he cried, his voce vibrating with sudden passion. "I'll pay you any amount up to a hundred thousand dollars, if you leave the house peaceably."

R. of M. C., No. 63.

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AS THE chief stock holder of the copper mines Phil had the power to call a special meeting of the directors. So far as he was able to judge, it would take at least half a million dollars to restore the mines to working order. Then there was the demand for more money to be met. He departed with the jeers of the striking miners ringing in his ears.

Perhaps no unhappier man ever stepped on a train. There was not the least doubt in Gordon's mind as to the seriousness of the situation. Absolute financial ruin stared him in the face.

The trip back home was one long nightmare. The train drew into the station about seven o'clock in the morning.

Without stopping in the city for breakfast, he boarded a taxi and had himself driven to Oak Manor. With haggard features and sunken eyes he stood at the door.

A sharp ring of the bell brought Tom, the butler.

"Oh, I am so glad you are back," was the butler's greeting. "Harry is seriously ill and——"

Phil did not wait to hear any more. He dashed past the man, dropped his traveling bag in the hall, and ran up the stairs.

The next moment he rushed into the nursery. Annie rose with a startled cry when she saw him.

"The boy——!" he gasped. "What—what has happened to my boy?"

In a trembling voice Annie told what had happened while he was away.

She related how little Harry had been mistreated by Mr. Perry, and how he had been imprisoned in the dark room at the suggestion of Alice.

It was indeed a pathetic scene as the father, tears of anger and grief streaming down his face, tried to get

a sign of recognition from his boy.

The latter's mind was still in a cloud, and although his eyes were wide open and staring, they remained expressionless.

"Dr. Van Buren says he is not in danger," Annie hastened to say in order to lighten her employer's burden. "Harry will be alright again with plenty of rest and——"

Gordon stopped her with a vehement gesture.

"You should not have left him," he cried. "You promised me you wouldn't. Just think the agonies that poor boy must have suffered when they locked him up. But there will be a reckoning now.

"My wife shall answer to me and so shall that damned tutor. I am going to have a final talk with her, and then I'll settle with him in a way that comes as a surprise."

Before Annie could speak again Phil rushed from the room and was headed for his wife's boudoir. He found the maid busy packing several trunks.

"Where is Mrs. Gordon?" he asked curtly.

"She left last night for New York," the girl informed him. "She ordered me to send these trunks as soon as they are ready."

Phil was not very much surprised. No doubt Alice had run away fearing his wrath. Perhaps she had other reasons for going to New York at this time.

And he had more than a vague suspicion that she did not go alone, for he knew that she had been in touch with Mr. Fredericks, the Chicago multi-millionaire.

"Oh, she is fit for it," was his mental observation. "She is fit for anything. But I did not think that she picked the man who started her sister Betty on the downward path."

His smile was grim, yet, it was a smile of relief.

What did it matter after all? At least he was rid of the woman who had made life a living hell for him. With his face set in hard lines he went downstairs to the library.

For a few minutes he remained in silent thoughtfulness, then he sent for Mr. Perry. To settle with this man was the next step.

The tutor entered, assuming a nonchalant air. Before Gordon could speak, he began:

"I wish to tender my resignation to take effect at once, Mr. Gordon."

The latter sat os if suddenly paralyzed. He had not been prepared for this. He stared at the speaker, his anger rising until it got beyond his control.

"I suppose you are resigning to escape being discharged, Mr. Perry," he said with ominous quietness.

"Not at all, sir," came back. "From the very outset I saw that I would not be able to handle such children as yours. They have been spoiled—hopelessly spoiled. It is for that reason I wish to leave."

Gordon was in no mood to tolerate such a palpable insult. With a sudden bound he was on his feet and confronted the tutor.

"Alright, you can go!" he hissed, his eyes flaming. "But before you leave this house I must tell you what kind of an ordinary brute you are. You struck my boy repeatedly, then you locked him up in that dungeon, and not enough with that, you——"

"Those were necessary disciplinary measures," Perry interrupted. "The boy deserved to be punished. He is not only the most stubborn lad I ever saw, but he has no regard for the truth."

"Do—do you mean to say that my boy is a deliberate liar?" the father demanded, his fingers twitching.

"I do. Mr. Gordon."

The last words had scarcely left the tutor's lips, when Phil, utterly beside himself with rage, drew his right arm back swiftly.

He let fly an uppercut which knocked Perry clear across the room.

The latter picked himself up. But he made the worst mistake when he assumed a belligerent attitude.

Although tall and of athletic build, he was no match for Philip Gordon, who charged instantly like a maddened bull. The thrashing Perry received, was merciless.

"I'll have you arrested for this," he howled, when at last he could get his breath.

With a mocking laugh Phil seized him by the throat and shook him as a cat might shake a rat.

It seemed to give him relief to punish the man. It was the only thing which kept him from losing his reason.

"Alright, you have me arrested!" he challenged as he flung the limp figure into a chair. "Go ahead and swear out a warrant. But I'll give you a worse beating if you do. And that is not all. I'll prosecute you for striking my little boy. I'll send you to jail if it is the last thing I do on earth."

It was some time before Perry was able to get up. He wiped the blood from his mouth with his sleeve, and for a moment stared at Gordon.

"Well, is there anything else you would like to say to me before I throw you out of this house bodily?" the latter remarked.

Abject fear was depicted in the tutor's face.

"Don't—don't strike me again," he begged. "I—I admit I went too far, sir, but your wife egged me on. She prejudiced me against the children. She urged me to——"

"I fully expected that," Phil cut him short. "But even that did not justify your brutal treatment. What have you gained by it? No father who has any love for his children will allow them to be abused. You are lucky you are alive, Perry.

"And," he added in a more conciliatory tone, "you must not forget that your conduct and methods are apt to give you a bad reputation. You will need satisfactory references in order to get another position, and you can't expect me to give them to you under these conditions, of course.

"Aside from the fact that my wife urged you to be hard with the children, you were too strict on your own account. Let us hope that you have learned a valuable lesson."

The tutor bowed his head.

"I have," he admitted frankly "I have been a fool."

Without another word Gordon sat down at his desk and wrote out a check. He paid Perry in full for the entire month.

"Here," he said, handing the check over. "This will square accounts between us. I suggest that you make preparations to leave at once. I can't give you a written recommendation."

Perry glanced at the check, shoved it into his pocket and left the library.

In the hall he faced the unpleasant task of passing the review of the servants grouped there.

They had been attracted by the altercation, and were naturally curious.

"Well, he got what was coming to him," one of the maids whispered to old Tom, the butler. "It was a shame the way he treated Harry."

Similar remarks, some of them which Perry

heard, caused him to hasten his steps. Within an hour he had his belongings packed and left Oak Manor with no regrets.

That afternoon when Dr. Van Buren called again, Gordon met him at the door. They went to the sickroom together. An examination proved that the boy's condition was practically the same. The terrible fright had unbalanced his mind.

"What he needs is a mother's love and care," the physician said, turning to Phil. "It was really too bad that you had to lose Miss Desmond. If she were here now, she'd bring the boy around in a few weeks. If I were you, I'd send for her."

"I would if I knew where she is," Phil replied with a groan. "I have been trailing her through a private detective agency, but she can't be found. I'd give anything I have to get her back."

Annie, who stood a few paces away, could not help but overhear the conversation.

She might have told them where to find Marie Desmond, but in doing so she would break a promise.

However, there was nothing to prevent her from informing the former governess of the Gordon children how badly she was needed at Oak Manor.

"I think if — if Miss Desmond knew about the boy's conditions, she'd hurry back fast enough," Dr. Van Buren remarked after a pause.

"What makes you think so?" Gordon asked, with a quick look at the speaker.

"I'll answer that question some other time, Phil," was the enigmatic rejoinder. "Meanwhile leave no stone unturned to locate the young woman. You need her as much as the boy."

With that the physician picked up his case and moved toward the door. Gordon did not follow him.

For a long time he stood beside the bed, his moist eyes resting on the boy's pale features. A stifled moan rose to his throat. He failed to notice when Annie disappeared.

"Yes, God knows how we both need her, you dear little chap," he murmured as he stopped and touched Harry's lips with his own. "And we'll find her if it is humanly possible."

In her room, Annie was busy writing the message which was to bring Marie Desmond back to Oak Manor with all possible haste.

Chapter 207

MRS. CRAWFORD'S TREACHERY

E MUST now follow the fortunes of beautiful young Lillian Crawford for the next few chapters. It will be remembered that Mrs. Crawford came to Florida to take personal charge of her stepdaughter, and that Marie Desmond, the girl's companion, lost her position as a consequence.

Mrs. Crawford had shrewdly contrived to win Lillian's confidence by the assurance that she was no longer opposed to her marriage to Victor Talbot.

But behind this assurance lay a sinister motive.

Mrs. Crawford was more than ever determined that the young lovers should not wed. Talbot had ignored her advances.

He had given her to understand that she meant absolutely nothing to him.

A woman thus scorned becomes a fiend indeed. Mrs. Crawford vowed fiercely that her stepdaughter should never take her place before the marriage altar with the man she craved to possess.

In order to remove Lillian from any such possibility, she had decided upon a plan that was almost criminal in its purpose.

Before the young girl bid a last farewell to Marie Desmond, the latter voiced her suspicion.

"But remember this, dear child," she added encouragingly, "no matter what happens, I will come to your aid as soon as I hear from you. The moment you realize that Mrs. Crawford has any intention of keeping you a prisoner in some remote place, come to me. You

will find me at the home of Mr. Shields in Chicago."

And so with the address of Mr. Shields securely tucked away, Lillian followed her stepmother aboard the train which was to take them to Cincinnati.

Mrs. Crawford remained in an apparently pleasant mood.

She spoke very kindly to the girl as they were seated on the observation platform of the chair-car. She asked many questions which were not at all answered.

"What is the matter, dear?" she inquired with a show of sympathy. "Aren't you feeling well?"

"Oh, yes," Lillian replied. "I am well, but I do not quite understand why you are taking me to Cincinnati. We haven't any friends there, and——"

"Indeed we have," the older woman broke in animatedly. "I have often spoken about my cousin Carrie. She has a wonderful place in one of Cincinnati's best suburbs. And I know she'll show us a good time. That is what you need, my dear, plenty of diversion."

She paused for a moment. When she perceived that Lillian was far from satisfied with that explanation, she added somewhat hurriedly:

"Please, don't look so sad, child. Haven't I told you that Victor Talbot is to meet us in Cincinnati. We will find him at the Gibson Hotel waiting for us. So far as I am concerned, you can be married the day after we arrive. I haven't the least objection."

Lillian managed to smile. But it was a smile that was filled with doubt and misgiving. She was not at all sure that she could trust her stepmother.

During the rest of the trip conversation lagged frequently. Mrs. Crawford took great care not to let the young girl out of her sight.

It was late in the afternoon when the train drew into the Grand Central Station at Cincinnati.

"I'll tell you what we'll do," Mrs. Crawford said in a confidential tone as they made their way through the milling crowd. "We'll take a taxi and drive out to my cousin's place. We'll stay for a few minutes, then drive down to the Hotel Gibson and surprise Victor. How will that suit you, dear?"

It was too good to be true. Even the very thought of such a possibility brought a happy smile to the young girl's face.

"Alright, mother," she anskered a trifle wearily. "It suits me."

Mrs. Crawford frowned, and shot Lillian a swift glance through the corners of her eyes.

"What is the matter?" she demanded, standing still. "Don't you trust me? I actually begin to believe that you don't. That is the thanks I get for trying to bring you and Victor Talbot together."

"I—I want to trust you," the girl said, dangerously close to tears. "You know I do, mother. I could not stand another disappointment."

No response was made to this pitiful statement. Linking her arm through that of her stepdaughter, Mrs. Crawford proceeded to the street. Several taxis were lined up at the curb with drivers waiting for passengers.

"I want you to take us to this address," said Mrs. Crawford, handing one of the drivers a slip of paper.

"Alright," replied the man, touching his cap. "Get in."

An instant later the door was closed and the vehicle began to move rapidly up Central Avenue. At Eight Street it turned east and headed for the Gilbert Avenue viaduct.

On the way Mrs. Crawford had hardly a word for Lillian, who also was silent and oppressed by a feeling of helpnessness and fear.

After a ride of about half an hour, they had reached their destination.

At Mrs. Crawford's orders, the taxi stopped before a garden gate. At first, Lillian did not see the house, but a few moments later she saw a roof of grey slate peering out from among the trees which closely bordered the house.

The young girl's heart suddenly began to beat faster.

To her astonishment, she saw her step-mother paying the driver. Why was that?

"Shan't we want the taxi to go to the Gibson Hotel to meet Victor?" she asked, unable to conceal her uneasiness any longer.

"Oh no, he need not wait so long," was the evasive answer.

A middle-aged woman answered the bell, and it seemed to Lillian that she exchanged a meaning glance with her step-mother.

It seemed odd, too, that the latter did not ask at all if her cousin was at home, but followed the woman in.

The interior of the house made a very dreary, unpleasant impression upon the young girl.

The small window panes admitted but little light. It seemed as if the house had long been untenanted. They were led up a narrow wooden stairway which brought them to the first floor.

There the woman opened the door of a large, gloomy room and allowed the two ladies to enter.

Suddenly Mrs. Crawford turned to the woman and whispered a few words to her, then she turned to her step-daughter.

"Make yourself comfortable," she said, "we will have a little lunch."

Lillian did not move. Inquiringly, she gazed at

Mrs. Crawford.

"And your cousin — where is she?" the girl inquired tensely.

"My cousin!" Mrs. Crawford laughed in her face. "You will not make her acquaintance, I'm afraid. Can't you see that this has all been a farce—that it was only a little strategy to get rid of Miss Desmond? Now I will tell you the truth."

Before the astounded and horrified young girl could make a sound, her step-mother explained:

"Mr. Talbot has been acquitted, but morally, he has been found guilty. The jury was convinced of his guilt, but acquitted him because there was not sufficient proof against him. He was released, but he is a marked man!"

Without concerning herself about the agonized cry which escaped Lillian who had dropped into a chair, she proceeded mercilessly:

"He is an outlaw and will be one for the rest of his life. Wherever he goes he will hear 'murderer!' Everyone will avoid him, and his life will be a burden to him. I cannot permit you to have any intercourse with such a man.

"You must not take his disgrace with his name; for if you do, you, too, will be shunned by all. No, Lillian, I owe it to your father to guard you from such a misfortune.

"You would joyfully throw yourself on his breast if you found him now. You would not ask whether he can ever clear himself of this shame, whether he is an honorable man; but later would come repentance and despair.

"Then it would be too late to repair your thoughtlessness. I must guard you from all this, and that is why I have brought you to this house, and will take good care

that Victor Talbot will not come near you."

A choking gasp came from the breast of the young girl, and for a moment it seemed as if she would collapse.

But suddenly she sprang up and stood before her step-mother with flashing eyes.

"So this is my reward," she cried, "for placing my confidence in you? Do you realize what you are doing when you drive us both into desperation? I do not believe in his guilt! Though the whole world may condemn him, I know he is innocent, and for that very reason, while he is unhappy and unfortunate, I must be true to him!

"Whatever may have happened, or whatever will happen, my place is henceforth at his side, and all that he must bear, I will faithfully bear with him!"

As Mrs. Crawford shook her head forbiddingly, Lillian continued in increasing vehemence:

"Just think what he has already suffered! It is now that his wounded heart requires my love. He will long for me and will search for me. Oh, have pity, and let me go to him, and I will be grateful and bless you all my life!"

"No, you stay here!" The words came from Mrs. Crawford's lips with grim determination.

With a cry of despair, the unhappy girl fell at her feet.

"I have rarely called you 'mother'," she sobbed, "because I was unable to give you this name. Now I call you 'mother', for my father was your husband. Show yourself to be one! Have pity for me. Do not drive me mad. Let me go to him, let me comfort him!

"I cannot live without him, mother, I cannot! God Himself has brought us together and no one has a right to part us. And if you will not do it for my sake, do it for his. I know that you love him, be generous! Let

him suffer no longer, do it for his sake!"

With a suffocating cry, Mrs. Crawford fell back. This reminder of her love for Victor was like a slap in the face.

If Lillian still hoped, her last words forever embittered her step-mother against her.

Startled, the young girl retreated as she saw her step-mother's angry frown, and in a moment she realized her mistake.

She had said the words in fear and despair, with the sole desire of moving her heart and to awake pity for Victor.

Had she been cooler, she certainly would not have touched the tender spot of Mrs. Crawford's secret affection.

With glittering eyes, the older woman confronted her.

"So, you seem to imagine that I love him," she laughed with undisguised scorn. "And even if this were the case I would not degrade myself to run after such a man; and I shall prevent you from doing so. As sure as I stand here, you will never have my consent to become the wife of this dishonored man!"

"Take that back—take back those words!" cried Lillian, trembling in overwrought excitement, "he is not a dishonored man."

"He is a murderer! He is pointed out by all! You know my mind. You are not responsible in your silly infatuation, and I must think for you. But I warn you, do not drive me to harsher measures," Mrs. Crawford cried with inflexible sternness.

"You are still under my quardianship, and according to your father's will, I have the right to decide for you and your future.

"If you are reasonable, we will live quietly to-

gether, but if you are not, you must not be surprised that I treat you accordingly."

"No, I cannot be obedient to you in this," said Lillian. "I will not desert him. You may torture me to death, but I will not do it!"

"We shall see," replied Mrs. Crawford. "But this is enough. After this scene, I do not care to have lunch with you; it is better that you be alone."

With these words she went out.

Lillian's eyes followed her in despair. Miss Desmond's suspicions were well-founded, and only too soon had they been justified.

An indescribable horror of this woman, in whose hands her fate was held, seized upon the unhappy girl.

How short-sighted her father must have been to give her such power over his only child! How little he had known her real character!

Of course, it was hard to see her falseness through her mask of physical beauty, and it was just this outer beauty which had bewitched the aging man and had reduced him to slavish subservience to her.

Ah, beauty! Of what avail is a fair body tenanted by a fiendish soul?

Finally, sorrow and anguish in her heart crowded out the indignation which raged in Lillian against her step-mother.

Sobbing aloud, she threw herself on a couch and burst into tears.

Immersed in her grief, she did not hear that the woman who had admitted her was again in the room, serving a light meal.

Only when she felt her hand on her shoulder, did she look up. It was the woman in charge of the house.

"Won't you have something to eat now? The dishes will soon be cold," she said.

Lillian shook her head. There was a choking sensation in her throat. It would have been an impossibility for her to swallow a mouthful.

She sprang up as the woman left the room, and paced restlessly up and down.

What was she to do? What could she do to extricate herself? She was a prisoner again, and in a worse plight than before.

As a flash of lightning illuminates the murky darkness of night, the thought of Marie Desmond suddenly brought a plan to the mind of the distressed girl.

After all, she was not entirely forsaken; Marie would not forget her. If she did not hear from her within three days, she would put Talbot in knowledge of all that had taken place.

Lillian heaved a sigh of relief. She had quite forgotten about Marie's promise; again she could entertain hopes of liberty and happiness. Victor would know that in all his misfortune, she had remained true to him.

He would go in search of her. He would find her. A smile of happiness brightened her tearful face.

Mrs. Crawford was greatly surprised on the following day to see no more tears and prayers from Lillian.

She had expected the girl to struggle with all her might against the restraint to which she was being subjected; but she found herself mistaken. She naturally had no idea of the hopes which bore Lillian up.

Slowly and wearily the days dragged on! Lillian read a great deal and busied herself with sewing and fancy-work.

But her thoughts were always far away with her beloved, who by this time must know that she had been unswervingly faithful to him, and who must already have commenced to work for her freedom!

At meals she sat gravely and in silence opposite her step-mother, never volunteering a word.

She answered her questions in monosyallables only, and took no pains to hide the aversion she felt.

At last two weeks had gone by. Lillian was constantly on the lookout for a token from outside, but no sign or message came to her. Yet, she did not lose hope.

She said to herself that Victor Talbot could not possibly discover her place of confinement in this unfrequented locality to which her step-mother had brought her. She realized that he had not the slightest clue on which to base his search.

Gradually the thought of escape dawned on Lillian. Unceasingly she was on the alert for a favorable opportunity to carry out the plan she had formed.

Fortupnately, she was still in possession of a considerable amount of money; and this would help her in her venture. Quietly she observed the old woman who waited on her; she did not seem a promising source of help.

One morning, Lillian left on her dressing table a bracelet richly studded with pearls, a large diamond in the center. It was a birthday gift from her father.

"How beautiful! My, how beautiful!" exclaimed the old woman, taking the ornament in her hand and looking at it with a mixture of delight and covetousness.

Acting on a sudden thought, Lillian said to her; "You can have it, I will give it to you, but you must do me a favor."

The woman looked at her in surprise.

"What shall I do? I would love to own it," she replied.

"It is very valuable," said the young girl, "if you should want to sell it. The diamond alone is worth four or five hundred dollars."

"My, as much as that?" murmured the woman, opening her eyes wide. "Tell me, what do you want me to do?"

"Help me to get away from here," whispered Lillian. "I won't stay here long anyway, for my step-mother will soon take me to another place. It will not be hard for you to let me escape."

The woman shook her head thoughtfully from side to side.

"I am afraid I can't. How can it be done?"

"Get a strong rope," answered the girl, "and when Mrs. Crawford lies down after dinner, fasten it on one of the back windows. As she always carries the keys of the house with her, there is no other way I can get out of the house, except to let myself down by the rope and then escape by way of the garden.

"Mrs. Crawford, sometimes, does not look for me all afternoon, and, if she does not notice my absence until evening, I will be able to win a great deal of time. There can be no harm to you if I run away.

"You will be just as much surprised at my flight as my step-mother. You will know nothing about the rope, and if my step-mother discharges you, why, you lose nothing; you have the bracelet. But be sure that my step-mother don't see it."

The woman thought for a while.

"I'll think about it and let you know in the evening," she said at last, hesitatingly. "To tell you the truth, I don't like living here like a prisoner. I want a little company once in a while, myself."

"When you go shopping to-day," suggested Lillian, "couldn't you order a taxi to wait for me in the neighborhood, to-morrow afternoon? Then I could hurry to the railroad station and I would be safe."

The woman nodded. She was already won over.

The bracelet was too tempting, and the service here had become distasteful to her. Mentally, she agreed that she had nothing to lose, and everything to gain.

In the evening she gave Lillian her promise. She had already ordered the taxi and brought the rope. In her joy, Lillian could have hugged her.

In spite of its association, she was glad to give her the jewel so that she could fly from here and go to Marie Desmond, who, she knew, would help her further.

It was necessary to act so as not to excite any suspicion on the part of Mrs. Crawford. At supper, Lillian was as quiet and apathetic as usual, although her mind was in a nervous state of hopeful impatience all the while. A hundred times she thought, "would that the night were over!

She could not close an eye. Again and again she pictured to herself her meeting with Victor. Would she find him in his home?

In the morning, she prepared for her flight. The woman kept away from her, so that Mrs. Crawford might not suspect anything. Every hour seemed an eternity to the young girl.

At last it was noon. It was an awful trial for Lillian to sit opposite her step-mother at the table under her close observation.

It seemed to her that Mrs. Crawford spent more time at dinner to-day than usual. Finally, however, Lillian breathed easier. Mrs. Crawford withdrew to her room.

Now to work! The rope was soon fastened. The hour of freedom was at hand! Carefully, hand over hand, Lillian descended by means of the rope.

The height was not great and there was no danger. Thank God! She was down!

Nodding good-bye to the woman at the window,

she flew through the garden. She was on the road. Yes, there, within a stone's throw, she caught sight of the taxi. She was free!

The very thought made her feel dizzy with joy. No human power could now keep her from going to Victor Talbot, the man she loved so dearly.

Chapter 208

MARIE'S NEW HOME

WHEN MARIE DESMOND was relieved of the responsibility of being Lillian Crawford's companion, she decided to return to Chicago and have a talk with Mr. Shields, her loyal friend and adviser. So far as the future was concerned, she had no plans. But what really drew her back was the intense longing to be near those she loved.

And she was a little worried, too. She had not received a letter from Annie for nearly two weeks.

The last message from Oak Manor described the current happenings. Mr. Perry was still the tutor of her children, but he was very strict.

Mr. Gordon and "that woman"—as Annie always referred to Phil's second wife—were having their usual disagreements.

The children were in good health and progressing nicely with their studies. But not a day passed without them asking why Miss Desmond did not come back as she had promised to do.

Marie eagerly devoured all references to the children. It lightened her heavy burden to know that they were being cared for properly.

And it pleased her immensely when Annie wrote that Phil had strictly forbidden his second wife to interfere with their training or care.

Upon her arrival in Chicago, Marie had a taxi take her to the home of Mr. Shields. The latter had a fine home which was situated on Lakeshore Drive. Unlike most old bachelors, he preferred home life to that

of a club.

With several servants to administer to his comfort, he lived in the comfort his wealth could afford. And he lived systematically.

He rose every morning at seven, took a stroll along the lake front, then breakfasted at eight. Nine o'clock found him in his law office.

He had luncheon at the club, and dinner at home at six.

He had just seated himself to enjoy his evening meal when he heard the bell ring. A moment later the butler came in to announce that a young lady wished to see him.

"Who is she?" he asked, laying down his napkin.

"She has been here before, sir," said the butler. "I think her name is Miss Desmond, sir."

Mr. Shield's features wrinkled into a pleasant smile. He ran out into the hall where he found the unexpected visitor seated.

"Well — well!" he cried, approaching with both hands outstretched. "I am surely glad to see you, Marie. And you are just in time to eat dinner with me. Take off your things and make yourself at home."

She placed her small white hands in his, and for a moment they looked deep into each other's eyes.

Marie's were moist with pleasure at the hearty reception accorded her. She removed her wrap and hat, then allowed Mr. Shields to lead her to the table.

"Now I want you to enjoy this meal with me, my dear," he smiled. "And after a while I want you to tell me all about yourself."

Marie caught the motive behind this statement. They could not exchange confidences while a servant was present constantly to wait on them. While they ate, they talked about commonplaces.

But after the dinner was over, and they were seated in the old lawyer's study, she unburdened herself.

She told how she had taken the position as Miss Lillian Crawford's companion and how she had been dismissed by the young girl's step-mother.

While Mr. Shields knew something about the Crawfords and the Talbots, he had no idea of the trouble which existed in that quarter.

He knew that Victor Talbot had been acquitted for the want of conclusive evidence of having killed Roger Hawkins.

But he was unaware that Mrs. Crawford had refused to sanction a union between the young folk because of the unfortunate affair.

"Mrs. Crawford is in love with Victor Talbot herself," Marie declared with much feeling. "And she is determined to keep poor Lillian away from him. She has the girl bluffed with her threats to send her to a reform school if she don't mind."

Mr. Shield's smile was not exactly of the agreeable kind.

"I suppose Mrs. Crawford has full jurisdiction so far as the girl is concerned," he remarked quietly. "But she can't send her to a reform school unless Lillian is wayward. I am very sorry for her."

Marie got so worked up discussing Lillian Crawford's case that the tears came. She almost had the old lawyer blowing his nose.

"When Mrs. Crawford came to Florida to take the girl away, I suspected mischief," she ended. "I was convinced that her stepmother intended to hide her somewhere. But I told her to come here if harm threatened. I gave her your name and address, Mr. Shields. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all," responded the old lawyer promptly.

"You know," he added with a peculiar lifting of the eyebrows, "I have a tender spot for young lovers who are being kept apart by force. I'll gladly do all I can for Lillian."

The conversation now turned to Oak Manor. There was a genuine surprise in store for Marie when she was told that old John Procter had died almost a pauper.

"I knew that his affairs were in a bad state," Mr. Shields went on gravely, "but Procter would not listen. A few bad investments swept his entire fortune away. I shall never forget the hour after the funeral when I was called upon to read the will.

"The only thing the old gentleman bequeathed to his daughter Alice was the family bible, with the injunction that she should read a few passages in it every day."

Marie could not resist a smile.

"Rather hard on Alice, wasn't it?"

"It nearly killed her," said Mr. Shields. "At the conclusion of the reading of her father's will, she collapsed. The realization that she had been beggared through her father's bad speculations was a bitter disappointment to her."

"I wish I could feel sorry for her," murmured Marie, "but I can't because she is directly responsible for all of my troubles. She was the cause of me leaving Phil. When I came back as Marie Desmond, to take care of my children, she treated me like the dirt under her feet."

The lawyer was staring at the floor in silent thoughtfulness.

When he raised his eyes a little later and met those of his lovely visitor, there was an expression of reproach in them.

"Don't you think it was a mistake on your part to

pose as a stranger in your own home, Marie?" he asked softly.

"Perhaps it was," the latter admitted. "But I could not do anything else under the circumstances. How could I reveal myself as Phil's first wife when he had married again?

"When I went to Oak Manor after I heard that little Harry was seriously ill, I was still under the impression that Phil had never forgiven me, and that he still believed in my dishonor. And he did.

"He would not have tolerated me a single hour under the same roof with him. When I found out how badly my boy needed me, I simply had to stay and keep on playing the role of a stranger.

"But, thank God, I had the joy of hearing myself lauded to the skies by the very man who discarded me and threw me out of his house. Phil learned the truth when Jack Hoover made a confession on his deathbed. Oh, it was a frightful scene, and God only knows what I suffered that hour.

"I had to listen as he reproached himself bitterly, and how he expressed his deep longing for the woman he had cast off. He told me one time that he would gladly give twenty years of his life to have me back. It was then that I learned of all the misery he had endured since he married Alice Procter.

"My heart went out to him, but I had to remain silent and continue playing a stranger to him. Oh, you —you don't know how I suffered. You——" She could go no further because tears choked her.

Mr. Shields reached over and petted her shoulder very tenderly.

"Yes, I can imagine very well what you suffered, my dear child," he soothed. "And I wish I were able to help you. I have not kept the promise I made to your

father very well, have I?"

"You have always been kindness itself to me," said Marie, smiling through her tears. "I don't know what I would have done without you."

Again the old lawyer stared at the floor in deep thought.

"Well," he drawled at last, "God has been good to you in one way at least. When your uncle died in Australia, he left you a fortune. You can afford to live in luxury for the rest of your life."

"It means nothing to me unless I can share that fortune with those I love," she answered with a pathetic drooping of her lower lip.

Mr. Shields grinned.

"Perhaps you will some day," he declared. "Who knows?"

Prophetic words they were, and neither of them suspected at the time how soon they would come true.

Marie brightened up perceptibly, and she changed the subject of discussion by again mentioning Victor Talbot. She told Mr. Shields that she had promised Lillian Crawford to write to him.

"I'll do it this very night as soon as I get to the hotel," she said.

"Why go to a hotel, my dear?" the old lawyer queried. "There are several rooms upstairs waiting for an occupant. Won't you let me persuade you to make your home with me for the present?"

She looked at him, surprised.

"You are only joking, Mr. Shields."

"I was never more serious in all my life," came back convincingly. "I have often told you that when your father died I promised him to look after you. I have done that to a small degree only.

"Right now you are without a position and have

no particular place to go. I gladly offer you my home. My sincere friendship and esteem were always yours."

Marie's beautiful face was flushed, but she shook her head slowly.

"I value your friendship too much to risk losing it by such an imposition," she responded. "And besides, what would your friends and neighbors say if you entertained a strange young woman in your home?"

Mr. Shields squared his shoulders.

"Hang friends and neighbors," he cried. "What are they to me?"

She had to laugh at the old man's vehemence.

"You must stay," he went on pleadingly. "If the gossips get busy we simply say that you are my niece from Australia. And think of the advantages you can enjoy as my guest right here in Chicago.

"You can watch developments at Oak Manor, and when the proper time comes——"

"What — what do you mean?" Marie broke in, excited.

"I have an intuition that you will be needed in your old home before long," he told her. "See if I am not right."

Her heart began to beat fast.

The very thought of living again at Oak Manor, even as a stranger; a governess to her own children, was good to dwell upon. The thought created new hope and a feeling of joy.

"Do — do you really want me uncle?" she said with a mischievous twinkle in her lovely eyes. "How do you like to be called uncle?"

The old lawyer's only reply was another pat on the shoulder and a benignant smile.

He touched the bell a moment later and ordered the servant who appeared to get a room ready for Miss

Desmond, his niece from Australia.

As he made this declaration Marie could hardly keep her face straight. It was ludicrous to hear Mr. Shields utter a falsehood.

"Now," he said, with a grin after the servant had gone, "since you are a member of my family, I must acquaint you with the rules of the house. We have breakfast at eight o'clock sharp in the morning. You can eat luncheon whenever you chose.

"Dinner at six in the evening, after which your charming society is to be devoted to me exclusively. You will have to sing and play for me occasionally. In turn for this I promise to take you to a good show occasionally. Is that alright?"

Marie rose in mock seriousness.

"Quite alright, uncle," she answered with an elaborate bow. "I shall endeavor to make myself as pleasant and useful as I can in your household."

Chapter 209

AT LAST

DURING the next few days Marie became accustomed to her new surroundings. Mr. Shields was like a father to her. Every slightest wish was fulfilled, and this, in a measure, made her forget the circumstances which separated her from those she loved.

Much of her time was spent in locating Victor Talbot. She was anxious to have her suspicions concerning Mrs. Crawford verified. But the man could not be located.

When she called up Mrs. Ruggles at the Talbot home, the latter told her that so far as she knew, Victor was still in Florida, where he had gone in search of Lillian Crawford.

For reasons of her own she kept the fact that she was making her home with Mr. Shields, from Annie.

All communications from this faithful girl were still sent to the address in the South and forwarded to Chicago from there.

One evening as Mr. Shields phoned that he would be detained at the office indefinitely, Marie was compelled to eat dinner alone.

As she finished she strode out into the hall. Through the glass panel in the door she noticed a taxi coming to a stop in front of the house.

Thinking that perhaps one of Mr. Shield's clients was coming to call on him at his home, she turned to walk upstairs.

One of the servants would tell this visitor that the

attorney was still at his office.

However, something impelled her to pause on the first step. Glancing again through the glass panel in the door, she was not a little surprise to see a young woman come up the walk in apparent haste.

At first she did not recognize her. Suddenly a low exclamation escaped her lips.

Running to the door she swung it open, and Lillian Crawford almost fell into her arms.

"Quick, hide me!" the young girl gasped. "I ran away from my stepmother and she is coming after me!"

Without saying a word Marie drew the trembling girl upstairs. Lillian Crawford seemed to be near a physical collapse. This was not the time for asking an explanation.

Very tenderly the fugitive was put to bed. Before she closed her eyes in much-needed sleep, she asked:

"Have you heard from Victor? Oh, just tell me that."

Marie dreaded to tell the truth. She swiftly sought for a reply that would have a tendency to put Lillian at ease.

"I have written to him, and I am expecting to hear from him in a day or two," she declared. "Now you must rest. To-morrow we'll discuss all that. I hope to have some good news for you."

Like the tired child she was, Lillian dropped into a deep slumber.

Going back downstairs, Marie fully expected to see Mrs. Crawford rush in and demand custody of her step-daughter. But the woman did not appear.

Evidently Lillian had been mistaken, or else she had successfully eluded her step-mother.

Mr. Shields was pleased when told of the news.

Continued in next number

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